

---

## Book Reviews

*Whose America? Culture Wars in the Public Schools* by Jonathan Zimmerman. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002. 307 pp. \$29.95.

John L. Rury  
*University of Kansas*

Jonathan Zimmerman loves a good argument and clearly enjoys writing about controversies in the past. In this book he examines a series of debates about public schooling spanning much of the twentieth century, focusing on issues of cultural identity, historical interpretation, religious values, and the social purposes of education. Along the way he challenges more than a few commonplaces about schools in the United States and how various social groups have come to see these institutions. Zimmerman offers a sprawling canvas of competing interests, each with its own vision of what should be taught and its own critique of existing policies and practices. It is an engaging story, described in considerable detail and careful in its attention to the intricacies of the viewpoints on the various issues it considers. Even if subject to criticism on matters of context and explanation, this is an important book that historians and other readers interested in education should read carefully. As Zimmerman notes in his conclusion, clashes over the content and disposition of the public school are an inescapable fact of life in a democratic society, and it is the ongoing pursuit of such disagreements that may be the best indicator of democracy's continuing vitality.

In an age when public discussion of schooling is dominated by a discourse of human capital, accountability, boosting achievement, and better-managed budgets, *Whose America* is a timely reminder that education is an inescapably value-laden process. Zimmerman illuminates issues that continue to divide Americans at present, even if they may lie dormant or roil just beneath the surface of national policy debates. Whose history should be taught, and how

---

JOHN L. RURY is professor and chair, Department of Teaching and Leadership, University of Kansas. His books include *Education and Social Change* (2002), *Education and Women's Work* (1991), and (as coeditor) *Seeds of Crisis: Public Schooling in Milwaukee since 1920* (1993). From 1992 to 1996 he served as editor of the *American Educational Research Journal*, and from 1999 to 2003 he was a senior program officer at the Spencer Foundation.

Permission to reprint a book review printed in this section may be obtained only from the author.

should it be interpreted? What is the role of religion in the schools? How should the question of sexuality be treated? What is the meaning of multiculturalism, and who is to determine the cultural character of curricula? These may well be timeless questions, and perhaps intractable, but Zimmerman reminds us that they have had a turbulent history in American schools. Whether his accounting is exhaustive or fully accounts for such phenomena is another question. Yet there can be little doubt about the worthiness of simply describing these debates.

The book is divided into two parts, each with a distinctive topical and chronological emphasis. They are linked to broad themes that Zimmerman identifies at the outset, with debates over patriotism and religion representing metaphorical roads from Chicago and Dayton, Ohio, following Walter Lippmann's 1928 reference to controversies over textbooks and evolution. The book's opening section deals with debates over history and related fields in the nation's schools. The second is concerned with even more basic values and describes conflicts on a number of fronts, ranging from religious instruction to sex education. Both parts are joined by a common interest in competing images of a society considered desirable for the future. Ultimately, Zimmerman questions whether such clashes are subject to resolution or whether they should be celebrated as an indispensable feature of democratic schooling.

The narrative opens with an account of the "history wars" of the 1920s, which focused on matters ranging from the depiction of the founding fathers to the treatment of various immigrant groups in popular history texts. This was the age of a "new" history, articulated by the likes of Arthur Schlesinger and Charles Beard, emphasizing the role of social and economic development rather than great men in shaping historical events. Zimmerman suggests that professional historians were beset on all sides, attacked by patriotic groups for slighting Revolutionary War heroes and by politicians for the depiction of various ethnic groups. The most conspicuous flap may have been Chicago Mayor "Big Bill" Thompson's condemnation of textbooks he deemed "pro-British," an election ploy to divert attention from his own egregious record of corruption and ineptitude. But there were plenty of others, as one group after another protested its treatment in print or decried new texts that seemed to alter the traditional grand narrative of progress. In the end, Zimmerman suggests that the real issue was whether all would feel included in the familiar chronology, not if a different story was more appropriate. Most protesters were eager to proclaim loyalty, even if some groups and individuals remained uncertain about the fairness and justice in certain facets of American life.

A parallel battle occurred over the treatment of the South in history texts, as Southerners decried the vilification of their role in the Civil War. Curiously, some embraced the new history of Beard and like-minded authors, because it suggested that economic forces accounted for sectional conflict and placed

less emphasis on slavery. At the same time, new scholarship in "Negro History" suggested additional lines of instruction for the region's segregated black schools. Spearheaded by Carter G. Woodson, a fresh emphasis on teaching black history swept the South, highlighting the achievements of previous generations and the virtues of responsibility to the race. Woodson and other black educators, however, were careful not to offend time-honored sensibilities, despite sympathies with radical nationalists such as Marcus Garvey. Zimmerman notes that traditional accounts of slavery and "the war between the states" continued to dominate Southern historical discourse. Unlike ethnic groups in the North, African Americans remained severely circumscribed in their ability to comment on history, despite the vitality of black history as a field of inquiry.

Zimmerman turns to ideologically right-wing assaults on history texts in chapters on the New Deal and the cold war. He describes the campaign to discredit the popular books of Harold Rugg and to champion a social studies curriculum congruent with traditionally conservative American values. Despite claims to impartiality, Rugg did represent a perspective that was broadly critical of American capitalism, and he was resolutely supportive of the New Deal. His books, in that case, were easy targets for a range of interests opposed to Roosevelt's policies and became a lightning rod in the political storms of the era. Eventually, the American Legion and like-minded organizations undertook a successful campaign to drive Rugg's books from the schools. Right-wing critics continued their campaign of critiquing history texts after the Second World War but found considerably less popular support. Zimmerman makes note of the change in public reaction to these attacks but does little to assess it.

The final chapter in part 1 concerns the revival of black history in the 1960s. Partly a response to the Civil Rights Movement and black student rebellions in high schools and colleges, courses in black history and literature became ubiquitous by the end of the decade. Zimmerman notes, however, that while this development succeeded in adding a new group of figures to the standard American history curriculum, it did little to change the prevailing narrative of freedom and progress. Academic historians eventually abandoned references to "Sambo" and the "benevolent" interpretation of slavery, marking a historiographic watershed. But Zimmerman maintains that the impact on the general shape of instruction was slight, and eventually student interest seems to have waned. Like the immigrants in the 1920s, African Americans finally succeeded in getting their own heroes into mainstream history texts. But the more radical aims of exposing American society as fundamentally racist and exploitative, often espoused by militant students, never were realized.

In part 2 Zimmerman turns to religious issues, including debates over sex education in the 1960s and beyond. He describes efforts to make religious instruction available in after-school programs or as church-sponsored classes

during the school day. Backed by a number of religious groups, such programs expanded significantly, even after the 1948 McCollum decision delimiting religious instruction in public schools. There were debates about the content of these classes, especially in the wake of ecumenical efforts to create a common religious curriculum. But this was only a prelude to the storm that eventually broke over the question of school prayer in the 1960s. The Supreme Court's decisions in *Engel v. Vitale* (1962) and *Abington v. Schempp* (1963) banned Bible reading and prayer in public schools, provoking an immediate reaction. Zimmerman argues that the prayer controversy endured well beyond these cases, however, and eventually contributed to the rise of the New Christian Right in the 1980s.

Sex education is the final issue considered in the book. Its genesis overlapped with the prayer conflict both in terms of timing and many of the individuals and groups involved, but debates over the treatment of sex as feature of the curriculum also were quite distinctive. Zimmerman focuses on the Sex Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) as emblematic of the doctors, social scientists, and other "sexperts" interested in sex education in the 1960s. The success of SIECUS in promoting instruction about sexuality drew fire from a number of sources, including the ideological right ("Birchites"), the religious right, and groups of concerned parents. The latter were particularly exercised by what many perceived to be a usurping of family prerogative in questions of personal morality and an inciting of youth to partake of the "sexual revolution." Zimmerman notes that the furor eventually cooled, however, and as sex education became ever more ubiquitous its opponents shifted ground, demanding a curriculum focused on "abstinence" rather than information.

In his concluding remarks, Zimmerman dwells on the various arguments that evolved in response to curricular developments and other changes in the schools across the 70-odd years covered in the book. There is some consistency across time, of course, but he also finds a curious evolution, wherein even the most diehard opponents of a particular measure eventually come to accept its basic premise and shift their position to take account of its existence. Critics of sex education, for instance, in the 1980s did not call for its abolition, instead offering their own view of what ought to be taught. Similarly, debates over the content of textbooks hinged less on ideology than a process of cultural bargaining: "you get your heroes, I get mine." As for the question of religion, Zimmerman acknowledges that it is singly impervious to compromise and conflicts may be unavoidable. This, he argues, is hardly a cause for despair, however, as debate and disagreements are integral to life in a democratic society. In the end, it is the very contentiousness of such issues that binds us together; perhaps the most profound lesson in democracy is learning to live with differences.



If Zimmerman's strong suit is tracing the evolution of arguments about social issues in the schools, the book is considerably less clear when it comes to offering explanations for the ebb and flow of conflict. There is little discussion, for instance, of the historical context that may have influenced debates from one decade to the next. Zimmerman's argument about the history wars of the 1920s offers a new spin on the relationships between various immigrant groups and the schools. But it is hardly surprising that certain groups would endorse a patriotic rendering of their roles in American history during a time of relative prosperity, following immigration restriction and the forceful suppression of communists and socialist groups. One wonders what the response was some 20 years earlier or among the remaining socialists of the day. The textbook wars of the 1930s doubtless were an outgrowth of debates over the New Deal, but why was the public response to conservative attacks comparatively languid in the latter 1940s and 1950s? In discussing the "Cold War Assault on Textbooks," Zimmerman says little about the conservative ethos of the time and almost nothing about other traditionalist educational crusades.

The same might be said of the treatment of religion and sex education. Why did these issues spark such furious reactions? Was it because of anxieties related to the growing secularization of modern life? Was sex education controversial because of parental concerns about the expansive youth culture and its permissive atmosphere of experimentation? He does point to the influence of students in the multicultural debates of the 1960s and beyond, but there are many additional contextual factors to consider in this instance as well. Sometimes it is difficult to gauge the significance of the conflicts that Zimmerman describes. While he is long on outlining the positions taken in various critiques of school policies, it is hard to imagine whether much public sentiment lay behind them. When figures are provided they are suggestive but rarely national in scope. More often they are from such particular places as New York, Chicago, or the South, and thus are difficult to interpret.

Zimmerman hints at explanations for the patterns he observes but does not consider them at length. Instead, he is content to present an engaging chronicle of the debates themselves. Perhaps this is necessary in a book covering some eight decades of debates, dealing with different issues in a wide variety of settings across quite different eras in American history. Maybe it will fall to the next generation of historians to probe these questions further, to pose or test explanatory frameworks. In the meantime, Zimmerman has given us a captivating account of the debates that have revolved around a number of important social issues related to the public schools. In the end he suggests that such conflicts are the very stuff of democracy and that debate should be celebrated as an end in itself. Whether or not one agrees, *Whose America* leaves much to ponder about the shaping of American education across the twentieth century, and that in itself is important.

*The Education Gap: Vouchers and Urban Schools* by William G. Howell and Paul E. Peterson. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2002. xix + 275 pp.; appendixes, notes, bibliography, indexes.

Christopher C. Weiss  
Columbia University

On June 27, 2002, the U.S. Supreme Court issued its decision in *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*. In a 5–4 decision, the Court found that a program providing vouchers to Cleveland parents does not violate the Constitutional amendment on the separation of church and state. It remains an open question whether the *Zelman* case will have an impact on American education as substantial as the Court's 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, as some proponents of voucher reforms have claimed; however, the decision clearly changes the local political calculus of voucher programs. As policy makers adjust to this new environment, they will be eager to learn from the lessons of existing choice programs. From this perspective, the publication of William G. Howell and Paul E. Peterson's *The Education Gap: Vouchers and Urban Schools* could not be better timed.

Howell and Peterson marshal a remarkable amount of data from different voucher experiments in examining how choice operates in several field sites across the United States. Their arguments are primarily based on results from randomized field trials in New York City; Washington, D.C.; Dayton, Ohio; and a nationwide Children's Scholarship Fund program. The authors draw on data from similar, smaller demonstration projects from Milwaukee, Cleveland, Florida, and the Edgewood District of San Antonio, Texas, to examine specific questions.

Although there are many strengths to the data Howell and Peterson utilize, perhaps the greatest is the research design of the studies themselves. In their examination of voucher programs in New York, Washington, and Dayton, the authors conducted random-assignment field trials, a methodology common in other domains of scientific research but extremely rare in educational studies. In each of these three cities, the number of voucher applicants far exceeded the number of available slots, thus allowing a lottery to determine which of the applicant families received vouchers. By randomly assigning applicant families to treatment (voucher) or control (nonvoucher) groups, Howell and Peterson are able to eliminate the potential biases of selection effects and attribute differences in outcomes between the two groups to differences in type of school attended. Moreover, the interviewer teams collected data on

---

CHRISTOPHER C. WEISS is director of the Quantitative Methods in the Social Sciences Program at Columbia University.